

4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on New Horizons in Education

# School culture as part of Marketing-orientated approach

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**Abstract**

One of the possibilities of how to flexibly adapt to changes within the developing society, that strongly influences the school environment, is to apply marketing approaches comprising a complex system of inter-related factors focused upon the school and the school environment – all with the purpose to create a positive image. This paper presents findings related to perception of the school culture by pupils, teachers, employees and parents. Key-factors, that shape attitudes towards schools, cover particularly satisfaction of pupils, employees and parents, mutual communication, evaluation process which asserts effective risk prevention efforts and fosters positive school climate. The Creating an Environment for Emotional and Social Well-Being (WHO) survey, unfinished sentences, semi-structured interview and focus groups were applied as research methods. Gathered results show the following strengths: positive approach of pupils to teachers, providing a friendly, rewarding and supportive atmosphere, the prevalence of the formal-collegial school management model. Among main weaknesses findings state: sexual harassment of pupils (especially girls), feeling safe, applying a duties-based school model as well as on one-way communication of schools with parents. It has been proved that improving the competence abilities of a school lies in utilizing social marketing (education results are of benefit for its graduates as well as for the whole society) and in improving the positive school atmosphere.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of The Association of Science, Education and Technology-TASET, Sakarya Universitesi, Turkey.

*Keywords:* school culture; marketing communication; school marketing, school atmosphere

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## 1. Introduction

Currently we are facing an increasing number of schools where beside public and state schools there are also church and private ones. Due to this fact it is necessary that schools consider measurements regarded to their survival and transformation – resulting from constant changes within the developing society. Additionally such

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shifts have impact over the whole educational environment too, and if wishing to improve the competitive abilities, schools have to react adequately.

Mentioned changes are mostly related to demographic structure, different family life-style, rising diversity, political and legislative impacts and technological development. Schools therefore must adjust to changes in accordance with the developing society, new technologies, political and economic decisions (see Džupina, 2011). One of the possibilities is to apply marketing approaches within the school environment i.e. utilizing marketing activities aimed at schools and the school environment with the purpose to improve the general school image. This approach consists of a complex sequence mutually linked areas. These comprise modern and effective methods used within the teaching process in order to achieve quality within the education programme.

Furthermore marketing approach includes the use of an open communication as within internal level (fostering positive school climate) as within the external one (having good public relations). According to Andreánska, Cabanová (2012) positive school climate increases pupils' academic performance. Actually a successful marketing approach within the education environment is based on fulfilling needs, wishes and expectations of participants on both levels. According to Světlík (2006, p.25) the traditional paradigm on one hand stresses the needs of a teacher and school, whereas on the other hand the marketing approach emphasizes mainly the pupil as well as applies marketing-mixture methods, segmentation and a marketing oriented school structure. When having a look upon subjects being either primary or secondary participants of the education process (equally benefiting from the educational results) we have to state that schools provide benefits to everybody - children gain education, parents have a feeling of satisfaction that they are putting maximum efforts for the future of their child, employees enjoy working in an attractive environment with the opportunity to reach their own goals, wide public and stakeholders contribute to cultivation of the future generations and have an indirect influence over the improvement of the society and finally employees knowing that schools are preparing competent graduates.

However being aware of the needs and wishes of all involved participants is not enough to achieve the marketing oriented approach, it is also needed that a school has technical, legislative and personal capacities to be able to fulfill all needs that will be compared on a higher level to other competing schools. Representatives of the school management have to bear in their mind that only communication materials presenting the school either through attractive websites, newspaper advertisements or leaflets cannot fulfill the criteria for a positive school image when on the contrary there is a stressful atmosphere among employees, passive pupils and indifferent parents (Šramová, 2011).

Some authors assume that the best marketing approach to be applied at schools is the integrated one. (Lockhart, 2005). This approach has already been successfully used within the private sector especially in the area of improving the competence abilities that concern also public and state schools (Lockhart, 2005). A customer-oriented school institution emphasizes not only open communication with its customers, but also with the wide public. Both the education programme and human resources that the school disposes with are undergoing certain evaluation process all with the purpose to improve the effectiveness and the quality of the services (i.e. education) and to take into account the rapidly changing society. This type of management system therefore follows trends of the whole society, labor market and flexibly reacts to these issues. Either we speak of an integrated marketing (based on inter-relation of single elements and mixed-marketing), or a relation-based marketing (based on good relationships with parents, pupils, employees, graduates, other schools, wide public, state government, private sector etc.) the main goal is always the same – to improve the quality of the education process, to use finances in an effective way, to apply successful internal and external communication, to create a positive school image within minds of the wide public. Regarding utilization of the marketing approach at schools we can also speak of a so called social marketing (Kotler et al., 2007), which means that the school, on the contrary to other competing ones, fulfills needs, interests and wishes of its target groups in a better and more effective way, places priorities upon satisfaction and ensures a long-term well-being.

Of course utilizing marketing approaches without having detailed knowledge of the whole school system is impossible also because education process within educational institutions does not follow exclusively commercial principles. According to the research carried out by the University of California in Los Angeles in 2005 (Bauerlein, 2008) it has been shown that not only the popular culture, but also approaches of a school to its students as to consumers lead to neglecting the school by its students. The McDonaldisation (Ritzer, 1996) appears more often also within the school systems, where more crucial is effectivisation, quantification, predictability and monitoring instead of underlining humanity (Šramová, 2011).

Quantitative indicators are first of all measurable and create an illusion of being objective, in opposite to the qualitative indicators which tell us more about satisfaction of pupils, their ability to solve problems, about natural curiousness, eagerness for knowledge, pleasure of learning and results. Unfortunately focusing at quantitative indicators, such as evaluating the education process, the role of a teacher (see in Sokolová, 2010), operation services, the time-tables and not creating stimuli and appraising teachers, occurs at present-day schools very frequently. It is obvious that satisfied employees are not only loyal to the company they are working at, but are also more prosocial oriented that fosters the positive school climate. What is more the school climate is afterwards reflected within mutual relations of a pupil and teacher, teacher and parent, motivation of a pupil towards learning. Furthermore thrust, respect, open-mindedness and tolerance are qualities that dominate at school with a positive climate. The quality of the management as well as of the employees (especially the pedagogical staff getting into primary contact with pupils and parents) form an important part of an internal school environment. The school culture made by rules, norms and in some cases by the code of ethics and mutual relationships has a strong influence over work of pupils, the school results and on its climate. The actual organization structure is always reflected within the school culture. Handy (1993) defines the following four types of a school culture that we can face also within the education process: 1. power culture, with a centralized power, 2. role culture, with defined roles and associated duties of an every employee, 3. task culture, focusing upon projects and tasks utilizing creativity and professionalism, 4. person culture, with an individual at the center of attention and with the whole organization adjusted to the person. According to Bush (2003) management models occurring within the school contexts could be divided into six groups: 1. formal model, emphasizes managerial system i.e. authority and influence are concentrated within formal positions held by individuals within the organizational hierarchy, 2. collegial-based model, stressing discussions resulting in consensus, 3. political model, based on a premise that power and influence within institutions is divided, 4. subjective model, aiming at needs and interests of an individual (and not at the interests of the whole institution), 5. ambiguity model, characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability, 6. cultural model, asserting non-formal aspects on the expense of formal elements.

A school utilizing marketing approach focuses, within its education process, upon the most effective ways of pursuing pupils' needs and wishes including all other clients as well. This approach is applied on the vertical and the horizontal level, what means that the vision of a marketing-oriented school is fulfilled by means of all participants of the education process. All employees (the door-keeper, the cleaner, the director, the secretary, the teachers) are forming the image of a school by their mutual relations and approach to pupils that influence attitudes of pupils towards school. Recently there have been few researches carried out that prove negative attitudes of Slovak pupils towards their school, what is actually rather alarming. Moreover negative attitudes towards school and school attendance is reflected within attitudes towards studying, fulfilling tasks and into establishing rather negative mutual relationships. One of the main tasks of any school is to cultivate the school climate that afterwards fosters positive approach towards the school itself and towards tasks of pupils and teachers as well. Creating opportunities for either life-long learning or burn-out prevention programs for teachers might only partially determine attitudes to schools. However improving teachers' competences and attempts to provide a high quality education are important to achieve pupils' progress and to shape a positive school image are very important but by far not the only ways. There are several factors that influence pupils', parents' and all other clients' satisfaction. Among these are also ways of communication with all persons involved, the design of

processes of evaluation in order to eliminate risk phenomena such as bullying, harassment, avoiding school attendance, experimenting with drugs etc.

In accordance with the above mentioned facts the purpose of this research was to explore perception of the school climate within chosen schools by all people involved i.e. – pupils, the school personnel and parents.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The participants consisted of parents (N=15), school personnel (pedagogical, non-pedagogical and managing staff) (N=30), and pupils of lower (N=110) and higher classes (N=153) at two primary schools in Slovakia.

### 2.2. Measures

To meet the set goals a combined methodological approach had been applied comprising quantitative and qualitative procedures.

One of the used methods was a survey *Creating an Environment for Emotional and Social Well-Being*. (WHO material adjusted to the conditions in Slovakia) . This survey is targeting pupils and school personnel and it monitors the following seven areas of a school quality: 1. connecting school and home life, 2. not tolerating bullying and harassment, 3. providing a friendly, rewarding and supportive atmosphere, 3. assuring a friendly, rewarding and empowering atmosphere, 4. Forbidding physical punishment and violence, 5. Valuing the development of creative activities, 6. Supporting cooperation and active learning, 7. Promoting equal opportunities and participation.

*Unfinished sentences*, designed for pupils attending lower classes, were related to school environment, relationships within the classroom and the whole school.

A *semi-structured interview* has been carried out with selected pupils (N=10), and parents (N=15) in order to explore the school culture, image, relations with class-mates, teachers and other school personnel.

A *focus group* has been realized including pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff. More specifically there were three groups including - N=8, N=10, N=12. In this case the main goal was to explore perception of the school quality, culture and the school climate.

## 3. Results

During data analysis we were concentrating upon interpreting the attitude of specific groups – lower classes, higher classes, the school personnel and parents - towards school, perceiving atmosphere and the school climate.

Pupils within lower classes referred more to technical description of the school. They expressed a very positive relationship with the teacher and moreover they accentuated the thrust of a teacher teaching them. High emphasis was put upon moral qualities of a peer; atmosphere within the classroom was seen as emotionally and socially very favorable.

Pupils at higher classes defined the most positive things related to:

- The school regularly organizes events during which publicly appraises various successes and achievements of its students (85.1%).
- The school has a policy of prohibiting physical punishment (74.0%).

- All pupils are aware of the school rules (77.7%).
- Pupils (mainly female) face sexual harassment (3.7%).

The finding related to the percentage of pupils facing sexual harassment was rather alarming and required a more deep analysis. During interviews it has been found out that this concerns various forms of haptic communication carried out by means of touching intimate parts of a body by persons of an another sex, as well as satirizing the other.

Among weaknesses pupils of higher classes listed the following issues:

- The discipline is kept in a good manner (37%).
- Pupils feel safe (44.0%).
- It is allowed to express dissatisfaction with inadequate or abusing behavior (33.3%).
- The school has a public program me related to the non-tolerance of bullying and to consequences related to such behavior (37.0%).

In this area it is evident that pupils notice lack of discipline-keeping, safety, limited possibilities to talk to the school personnel about inadequate behaviors towards them and lower awareness about examples of solving bullying at school.

According to the school personnel the following quality indicators (assessed using the WHO survey) were underlined:

- connecting school and home life (85.30%)
- not tolerating bullying and harassment (80%)
- promoting equal opportunities and participation (79.4%)
- providing a friendly, rewarding and supportive atmosphere (79.4%)
- forbidding physical punishment and violence (77.4%)
- valuing the development of creative activities (77.4%)
- supporting cooperation and active learning (71.50%)

The school personnel considered the school culture as task culture, the most typical features of which is orientation at tasks and projects. Moreover a formal and collegial-based school management model, where authority and influence are concentrated within formal positions – however when solving particular situations there is a shift towards a college-based model including discussions with the purpose to achieve consensus.

Pupils and parents perceived the formal model that emphasizes authoritative approach, as the most prevalent within task-oriented school management models. Furthermore the ambiguity model and in predictableness of the management has been perceived by this sample. On the other hand simultaneously analysis has shown the perception of a collegial-based model too. According to parents the communication with the school management is rather hierarchic, lacking feedback and clear determining of responsibility, unwillingness to solve conflicts, overestimation of material safety.

In the area of assessing the communication of the school with parents the following three levels have been identified (from the perspectives of involved parents):

- One-way communication carried out by the school towards parents – parent is only a recipient without a possibility for a feedback. Above mentioned approach was according to the parent's perspectives the most dominating one.
- One-way communication carried out by parents towards schools – the school is only a recipient without a possibility for a feedback.

- Both-ways communication where the school and parents are feedback oriented, the consequence of which is either elimination or avoidance of appearing conflicts and stimulating parent's participation at the school life. Moreover such type of communication results in loyalty of parents and pupils and in improving the school image.

Results show that this communication model was the least represented one within the school culture and management models.

Other analysis resulting from focus groups discussions was mostly aimed at perceiving the relationships marketing applied within involved schools. The following issues have proven to belong among the positive ones:

- contacts with local authorities
- contacts with managing bodies
- contacts with career organizations
- contacts with non-profit organizations.

Within weaknesses teachers listed the following issues:

- relationships with pupils, parents, graduates
- interpersonal relationships within the micro-environment
- relationships with other schools
- contacts with sponsors
- contacts with media representatives
- relations to the public.

Nevertheless several studies are pointing out the choice and importance of the propagation and presentation tools as a factor affecting attitudes towards school activities, what has been proved as insufficient within engaged schools (Jurášková, 2011, Soukalová, 2011).

#### 4. Conclusion

In order to be able to compare certain schools and to assess the school quality the utilization of unified criteria, used to evaluate social and emotional wellbeing within EU countries, should be mandatory. Moreover either teachers or the management and the state government could after evaluate specific issues of interest for a certain period and to compare gained findings not only from the perspective of one school but even from the perspective of a region, state and the EU. Above mentioned factors should have an effect upon improving competition abilities of given schools. However it is also crucial to build a positive atmosphere and not an atmosphere full of stress, uncertainty or fears.

The following important feature is to create marketing orientated schools, to spread social marketing, which means that results of the education process are for the benefit of the graduates and the whole society as well. The school should be aware of the fact that its positive image belongs among key-factors influencing interest of parents in its activities. Moreover a symbiosis of elements creating the school image is important i.e. localization of the school, cleanness, equipment, high-quality study programme, good public relations and empowering a healthy and positive school climate.

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